



COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST



RESTAURANTS

DAN EATON

Fast-casual soup chain out of Michigan making move into Central Ohio

What Chipotle is to burritos and Five Guys is to burgers, Zoup Fresh Soup Co. is trying to be for soup.

The Southfield, Mich.-based chain, at 26 restaurants in six states, is taking its next steps in Central Ohio. The fast casual soup merchant has signed franchisees Denis and Poonam Barboza and Mainak and Sejal Patel, who are securing the first area site for the chain, possibly in downtown Columbus or in Dublin.

Founder and Managing Partner Eric Ersher said Columbus is attractive given its white-collar, daytime dining population. Between 60 percent and 70 percent of the chain's sales are at lunch.

Denis Barboza wouldn't specify any locations for operations, but said the franchisees hope to be open this year, with a second restaurant a year later.



E. Ersher:
Zoup founder

Targets include downtown, Dublin and the Tuttle Crossing, Easton and Polaris areas. He's hopeful the name will catch on.

"It's a unique product and a good customer experience," he said. "And it goes well with the cold weather."

Ersher said Columbus could become a six-store market.

The menu features 12 soups a day, most rotating daily. Of the 100-plus recipe library, between 50 and 70 are in the rota-

tion at one time and restaurants always offer low-fat, veggie, dairy and seafood options.

The website lists the daily offerings and accepts online ordering. The chain also caters. The average check is between \$7 and \$8. The menu includes salads and sandwiches.

Ersher declined to detail annual sales or average restaurant receipts.

His first restaurant opened in 1998 and the chain grew by one company-owned store a year until 2003, when it began franchising.

It has five restaurants in the Cleveland area. Ersher said Zoup is scheduled to add six to eight restaurants this year and 20 in 2011.

The company is looking in the Northeast and Midwest, but not the South, and wants to cluster stores rather than build a network of far-flung locations. It is open to single- and multi-shop franchisees.

Upfront costs to open a store range from \$219,900 to \$432,600 per restaurant, according to the company's website. Weekly royalties include a 6 percent gross sales payment and a combined 1.5 percent for the national advertising fund and a customer service, training and mystery shopper fund.

